

Cameras will focus on dumpers

City to launch program to catch violators in the act

By RON NISSIMOV
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The City of Houston soon will be watching a little more closely for people who use neighborhoods as garbage dumps. Under a \$250,000 grant from the Houston-Galveston Area Council, the city is launching a pilot program to fund an advertising campaign against illegal dumping, and 15 cameras to catch people who don't get the message.

Neighborhood organizations will play a major role in determining where the cameras will be placed, said Suzy Hartgrove, spokeswoman for the city's Planning and Development Department. Organizations can submit lists of abandoned lots they want monitored to Houston police officers who attend community meetings, Hartgrove said.

The cameras likely will be installed within two months, she said. They will be mounted on utility poles and take a series of still pictures after they sense motion in a lot where they're pointed. The cameras also will emit loud verbal warnings to potential dumpers. "There would be bright flashes, like a strobe light, and then some kind of message will come out, like, 'Your picture has been taken,' " Hartgrove said.

After the one-year grant expires, the Planning Department will try to find the funding to continue the program. Hartgrove said Houston police use video cameras to try to catch potential environmental polluters, but those cameras are designed to provide evidence for criminal cases.

The still cameras are intended as preventive measures, she said. Mayor Bill White said the relatively small program won't do much to stop Houston's large problem with illegal dumping unless other measures also are in place to enforce ordinances strictly.

In order to receive the grant, the city promised to expand enforcement through training of officers and inspectors. Councilwoman Ada Edwards suggested that people convicted of illegal dumping be forced to wear T-shirts saying, "I was an illegal dumper," while doing community service. White said his recent proposal to have the Houston Police Department oversee neighborhood blight complaints instead of the Planning and Development Department will improve enforcement. According to city documents, the city last year received 3,700 complaints of illegal dumping. The city responded to 740 of those complaints, and the Harris County district attorney prosecuted 146 cases, collecting fines of \$110,000.